



Dramaturgy & Emerging Artists Panel Dramatugies#4, VCA

Panellist, Roslyn Oades
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I want to approach the subject of 'emergence' today from the experience of being an emerging theatre maker myself. I thought I would offer some reflections on my process over the last eight years, specifically under the mentorship of Urban Theatre Projects and BYDS (Bankstown Youth Development Service). Both of these organisations are based in South West Sydney (where I grew up) - they are literally next door to each other - and both are dedicated to supporting contemporary arts practice in collaboration with diverse communities.

I have created two new works with Urban Theatre Projects, *Fast Cars & Tractor Engines* (2005) and *Stories of Love & Hate* (2008) and am currently developing a new work called *I'm Your Man* with B Sharp. All three of these projects involve a through-line collaboration with BYDS. In order to analyse my experience on these projects with some accuracy, I'll start by telling you about the specific performance technique and community-authored process I have been investigating in my work.

Since 2001 I have been exploring a paperless form of theatre that I refer to as *headphone-verbatim* or *audio-scripting*. My projects utilise local oral history as their source material. Our starting point is to conduct an extensive series of audio interviews with community members. To give you an idea of the time frames I work in - the construction of my most recent show, *Stories of Love & Hate*, involved a two-year interview process with Sydney residents who were directly involved in or affected by the 2005 Cronulla race riots. At the conclusion of this process, I logged over 50 hours of audio and then edited this material into a carefully crafted audio-script. Our four actors were then given this audio-script on a CD - at no point did the actors receive a paper transcript.

During the rehearsal process, the actors listen to the audio-script until they know every inflection, breath and pause like a favourite song, but at no point do they memorise the material. The audio-script is then performed to an audience by actors wearing headphones, who reproduce what they hear with absolute precision, like an orchestra following a score. I like to call it a hyper-real performance technique. It has also been described as a non-actorly technique, in that the actors are not permitted to interpret the material emotionally or intellectually. The only creative input they are permitted is the physical interpretation of character. A common direction I give is: instead of your memory and emotions, use your ears and body. By that I mean the actors need to trust that all the character and emotional details are already embedded in the audio text. The actor almost stands back - like a medium, channelling the original interviewee without volunteering any emotional involvement.

My interest as an artist lies in the vocal print - the idea that the uniqueness of an individual voice, is akin to a fingerprint. The quality of each voice is encoded with a wealth of information - including details of age, gender, location, cultural origin, education and psychology. These qualities in addition to unique speech patterns, mannerisms, vocabulary, pace, habits, all add up to create a distinct identity. As a theatre maker, I operate on the theory that there is as much meaning in *the way* some one speaks as *what they are saying*. This has led to some interesting experiments in cross-casting. By preserving the vocal print and mismatching the voice with a speaker of a different gender, age or racial background, the audience is asked to listen in a new way.

I was first introduced to the idea of headphone-verbatim performance by British director Mark Wing-Davey at the London Actor's Centre in 2001. Over the last eight years I have continued to develop my approach to this form back in Australia. Distinct features of my process have included an interest in cross-casting (I work with a culturally diverse ensemble of four actors and we experiment with crossing gender, culture and generational lines); the recreation of group conversation; and the use of synchronised sound environments and visuals. I have also pursued an interest in recontextualising rarely heard or misrepresented Australian voices into positions of authority. My work aims to magnify candid, personal stories from within a specific community as a means of exploring broader social and political tensions - the 2005 Cronulla race riots being a prime example in the case of my most recent work, *Stories of Love & Hate*.

I could talk about my work for a lot longer, but I shall resist. I would like to return now to the subject of this panel. Specifically, I would like to talk about the tools and structures I have found useful as an emerging artist. In reflecting on the models of support I've received, I think the opportunity to draw from a combination of models has ultimately been of most benefit. Over the duration of my time with Urban Theatre Projects I have drawn from four distinct models of support and influence.

The first being BYDS (Bankstown Youth Development Service). I have a long history with this organisation – originally I discovered BYDS as a young person growing up in the Bankstown area and over the last sixteen years I have collaborated with BYDS director Tim Carroll on over thirty community-based art projects. On my return from a year spent in London, all fired up about *headphone verbatim*, I performed a sample of the technique for Tim in his office. At the time he was working on a Bankstown Oral History project intended for publication later that year and on the spot asked whether I'd like to make a show based on these great interviews he'd been collecting. And basically that moment of inspiration was the start of a very exciting creative journey.

Tim is a maverick arts worker, in that he acts on impulse, has an acute sense for artistic possibility and is consistently full of enthusiasm. What's more unusual in an arts climate stymied by complex grant applications, is that Tim acts on this enthusiasm with immediacy. BYDS will seed a good idea on the spot. Not with a lot of money, but enough money to pilot a project as well as the resources of a rehearsal space, audio-visual equipment and a large network of community contacts. I'll call this **The Proud Parent** or **Nurturing Model**. BYDS not only nurtured me as a young artist, but has invested in a long-term relationship with me and my work, as well as providing a home for any new ideas I would like to investigate (as BYDS has also done with many other local artists). As a result of this investment, I am extremely loyal to BYDS and in turn have invested in many BYDS projects and continue to feel very much a part of this energetic hub of local emerging artists (despite recently moving to Melbourne and no longer being technically 'young').

BYDS seeded my first project *Fast Cars & Tractor Engines*. We performed a fifteen minute version of this project at a short performance night where it came to the attention of Alicia Talbot, artistic director of Urban Theatre Projects (UTP). Let's call UTP, **The Professional Development Model**.

UTP took *Fast Cars* under their wing, surrounded us with a team of professionals and assisted us to develop a full-length show. This included a production manager, regular meetings with artistic consultant Chris Ryan, a script dramaturg, a sound designer, a filmmaker, a publicist, administration and the means to pay all these people for a three-week rehearsal period. A very short time in which to produce a new work, but surrounded by artists who knew what they were doing, it was an intense learning experience and we pulled off a concise show that I'm still very proud of. But it was tough. The lead up in particular was very tough. I worked with the artistic team for three weeks but in the nine months prior, I worked tirelessly on developing and refining my ideas in collaboration with UTP. Alicia was insistent that I be clear about my intentions before letting me loose. I remember being asked to re-write five or six versions of a document entitled 'What is the work about?' UTP provided a profound professional development opportunity, at times brutal in their honesty, but always rigorous in their dramaturgy as a company and passionate about creating relevant, concise, contemporary Australian theatre. I learnt valuable lessons about simplicity, focus, professionalism and integrity.

Some good advice included: your job as director is not to be everybody's friend. If something's not working, get rid of it – even if that means ditching the set three days before opening. Know your line of inquiry. And be prepared to work three times harder and longer than everyone else.

While developing my work with UTP I had the opportunity to participate in a week-long dramaturgy workshop with Not Yet It's Difficult (NYID), run by director David Pledger and lighting designer, Paul Jackson. I'll call this **The Think-Tank Model**. The dramaturgy workshop provided a space to listen and deconstruct creative process outside of the pressure of presenting. Much of what was discussed there has stayed with me, becoming process-models I still draw on. Some of the best advice I received was in regard to *the questions* in a work. The idea that while it is important to *identify the questions* before setting out, you don't need to *know the answers*. And I've found that a liberating notion in practice: when actors ask me what we're going to do about a particular problem – to have given myself permission to say, 'I don't know yet'. Which admittedly, can be challenging, when you only have three weeks to create a show, as was the case with my first work.

To help me manage my anxiety on *Fast Cars & Tractor Engines*, Chris Ryan helped me draw up a schedule that went like this:

- Week One: play with all the ideas but make no commitments.
- Week Two: trial your best ideas.
- Week Three: lock down and stream-line.

Other thoughts I drew from the NYID workshop was the idea of employing a collective dramaturgy. To use my whole team – ask everyone the hard and provocative questions. And I really like this idea of acknowledging that art evolves from a community context. I don't believe that artists invent in isolation. And in the case of being a writer/director, I've found it hugely rewarding to enter the rehearsal space and be confronted by fresh perspectives on the work – to challenge and extend what I've started. The opportunity to meditate on all these and many other thoughts, under the mentorship of David and Paul, with practical examples on DVD close at hand, was a well-timed gift.

The forth model I need to briefly mention, is what I'll term **The Inspirational Model**. By that I mean, a commitment to maintaining an awareness of (and a curiosity for) international artists exploring similar fields of investigation. In my case they include the work of Rimini Protokol, Anna Devere Smith, Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, Rotozaza and the installation work of artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, to name a few.

So those are my four models: The Nurturing Model, The Professional Development Model, The Think Tank Model and The Inspirational Model. Or in other words, some encouragement, some professional support, room to think and some inspiring role models. In my experience I found the combination of these elements to be a great incubator for new work.

The last thing I will add to this list – was the opportunity to make a second work extending upon the discoveries made in the first. If there were drawbacks on my first project it was the lack of time with a team of artists. On my second project, we were all equipped with more practical knowledge as to the demands of my particular working process. On *Stories of Love & Hate*, I was able to have two short creative developments providing time and space to rethink and restructure material before heading into the production phase.

Related links:

[Stories of Love & Hate](#)

[Fast Cars & Tractor Engines](#)

[I'm Your Man](#)